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Perceptions of Students Taking Media Literacy Course on Content of 6-7 February 2023 Earthquakes

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the perceptions of students taking a media literacy course about the content shared during the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes within the framework of media literacy theories. Structured interviews were conducted with 30 students. The participants experienced problems such as access and infrastructure problems, conscious access restrictions, disinformation and panic news. They struggled with competencies such as "cognitive skills", "emotional skills", "moral skills" as pointed out by Potter (2016) and "critical thinking" emphasized by theorists such as Hobbs (2010) and Brown (1998). Participants mainly confirmed their information by following official sources, government, teyit.org, Kandilli Observatory, AFAD and AHBAP as a private aid association. Participants predominantly received information from X, but also used applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook, and confirmed information from multiple sources, as Kellner and Share (2019) point out. As Jenkins (2006) points out, although they were active participants, they experienced problems due to disinformation. This reveals that digital media literacy in particular needs to become widespread.

KEY WORDS

Crisis Journalism. Disaster. Disinformation. Earthquake. Earthquake Journalism. Media Literacy.

1 Introduction

Crisis communication is a highly sensitive type of journalism in which journalists' emotions play a role. With this type of reporting, journalists are under the pressure of different conditions such as social, situation-specific, ideological, political, economic, cultural, etc. (Kotišová, 2019). However, with the widespread use of the internet, especially after the 2000s, mobile phones have started to play an important role in crisis communication (Gordon, 2007). In the earthquake that hit Kahramanmaraş-Turkey on 6-7th February, one of the most used communication tools was the mobile phone (Tuna, 2024). Therefore, when it is considered that most of the communication is made via social media, it has become important to evaluate the information obtained from mobile phones as a medium in the context of media literacy. The question of how people manage their media literacy skills during an earthquake, when crisis communication becomes vital, constitutes the starting point of this study.

In this study, structured interviews were conducted with 30 students selected from those taking the media literacy course at Gaziantep University, Faculty of Communication, Department of Journalism, and information was obtained about the student's access to information during the earthquake, the ways of confirming the accuracy of information, and the sources they used the most. In this way, the aim was to reveal the perceptions of students, who should be more sensitive to media literacy, in relation to the media in the context of receiving information during the earthquake.

1.1 Crises Reporting Journalism

Crisis comes from the ancient Greek word *krinenin*; it means to decide, to choose, to separate (Cunningham, 2020). The word crisis, which was adopted especially in the fields of law, medicine, theology, economy and politics in the 17th century, gradually became a part of daily life (Vincze, 2014).

One of the areas where the word crisis has been used most recently is the media, especially with the diversification and development of digital platforms. Crisis journalism is a type of journalism that shows the meaning of unexpected danger. It is about "scary, alarming and bloody" news (Umeogu and Ifeoma, 2012). For this reason, due to the nature of the crisis, journalists sometimes have difficulty in reporting crisis events and conveying such events properly (van der Meer et al., 2017). Limited public information in crisis situations often leads to speculation (Veil, 2012).

Crisis periods have the potential to affect journalism practices, often negatively, and the reporter may experience a dilemma between giving fast news and giving accurate news. The desire of reporters to achieve instant results may lead to many faults (Brautović et al., 2019).

1.2 Kahramanmaraş 2023 Earthquakes and Access to Information

Turkey is one of the countries where various types of disasters occur. The most common disasters in Turkey are earthquakes and floods (Nazlı & Soylu, 2023; Gözükızıl & Tezcan, 2023).

In the Kahramanmaraş-centred earthquakes that occurred on February 6th, 2023, many citizens lost their lives and hundreds of thousands of citizens were injured (Nazlı & Soylu, 2023). In the early hours of February 6th, 2023, a 7,8 magnitude earthquake occurred in the Kahramanmaraş region of southeastern Turkey. Nine hours later, another earthquake of magnitude 7,6 occurred. According to the statements made in March 2023, a total of 57,000 people died in the earthquakes, 50,000 in Turkey and 7,000 in Syria (Hussain et al., 2023).

During the earthquakes, there was a need for information flow, especially from cell phones. Looking at the data obtained by the verification platform teyit.org, which analyzed suspicious content on social media between February 6th and March 28th, 2023, it was seen that 98 news items were false, 8 news items were true and 4 news items were mixed (Aydın, 2023).

It has been stated in many studies that disinformation carries a great risk when it comes to digital media (Rosenberg et al., 2020; Jeong et al., 2012; Vraga & Bode, 2017). People who improve their media literacy skills are less exposed to misinformation (Damico et al., 2018; Jones-Jang et al., 2019; Lee, 2018; Jeong et al., 2012).

Presenting previously experienced earthquakes as news and content that is taken out of context paved the way for manipulation. Platforms such as yalansavar.org dogrulukpayi.com, malumatfurus.org and teyit.org have become critical in the fight against disinformation. It is especially important not to interrupt the wireless communication network in disasters (Aydın, 2023; Maden, 2023; Güngör, 2023; Bozkurt & Demir, 2023; Ortaç & Yıltaş-kaplan, 2021).

1.3 Media Literacy and Some Principle Theories

According to Ofcom the definition of media literacy is as follows: "The ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts" (2004, p.10). Based on these researchers, themes such as participation, choice, compliance with ethical principles, criticality, communicativeness and access come to the fore in media literacy. These principles are important enough to affect even human life in times of crisis.

Researchers working on media literacy have put forward many different theories. Kellner and Share (2019) stand out with their Critical Media Literacy theory. They emphasize empowering individuals to critically analyze media. They advocate for:

- cross referencing: verify information from multiple sources;
- source evaluation: check the reliability of the source;
- fact-checking tools: use tools like Snopes or FactCheck.org.

Buckingham (2003) developed the Media Education Paradigm. It emphasizes critical thinking, media analysis and active engagement. Critical analysis is about understanding the purpose and biases of media sources. Media production is about creating content to understand its impact. Cultural context is about recognizing how culture shapes media interpretation. Mihailidis (2014) developed the Digital Media Literacy Model. This model emphasizes:

- critical thinking;
- ethical awareness;
- active participation.

Furthermore, Hall (1980) blended cultural studies with media literacy. According to him, encoding and decoding are used to encode media messages. Silverblatt et al. (2014) developed the Multidimensional Media Literacy Model. Jenkins (2006) developed the theory of Participatory Culture and Media Education. Gordon and Mihailidis (2016) developed the Civic Media Literacy model. Jolls and Thoman (2008) developed a model called Empowerment Spiral. Their basic theme were awareness, analysis, reflection and action. This model emphasizes continuous learning and application, empowering individuals to become more critical consumers and producers of media.

Other important theories on media literacy are as follows: McDougall (2019) Media Literacy as a Social Practice, Scolari et al. (2018) Transmedia Literacy, Freire (1970) Critical Pedagogy of Media Literacy, Eco (1976) Media Literacy and Semiotics, Messaris (1994) Visual Literacy, Prensky (2001) Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants. Although Eco's theory is not specifically related to media literacy, it provides foundational concepts that are crucial for understanding how media messages convey meaning. Prensky's model concepts highlight generational

differences in interacting with technology, crucial for understanding varying levels of media literacy. According to Brown (1998), media literacy is related to cognitive processes in critical thinking. For him, meaning depends on what audiences bring to their media experiences (selective perception), the context in which they use media (coherence), and how and why they use media (use and pleasures).

Potter (2016), known for his Cognitive Model of Media Literacy, states that media messages can have harmful as well as positive effects.

In Potter's (2016) media literacy theory, 4 domains are extremely important:

- cognitive;
- emotional;
- aesthetic;
- moral.

While the cognitive domain is related to how participants use their own knowledge to access information, the emotional domain includes people's emotional responses to noise factors such as misinformation. It also refers to their ability to recognize and cope with their own emotions. The aesthetic domain is about how they evaluate the artistic and visual features of the media content. The moral domain is about users' ability to make ethical evaluations.

Hobbs (2010), who developed the Empowerment Spiral Model, emphasizes the importance of access, analysis, evaluation, creation and participation in understanding and using media effectively. These five competencies work together. The analysis is about critically analyzing media messages. Evaluation is about assessing the credibility and quality of media prompts. Creativity is about producing your own media content and expressing your thoughts effectively. Participation is about actively participating in digital communities.

Livingstone et al. (2005), who developed Media Literacy and Civic Engagement, state the three main purposes of media literacy. These are:

- democracy, participation and active citizenship;
- knowledge economy, competitiveness and choice;
- lifelong learning, cultural expression and personal fulfillment.

Since media literacy adopts a critical approach at its core, it supports an informed, creative and ethical society. According to Livingstone et al. individuals should:

- evaluate sources: Check the intention behind news sources and their credibility;
- understand context: Understand how context shapes information;
- identify biases: Be aware of potential biases in the news.

In summary, it can be said that media literacy theories are based on the themes of critical thinking, ethical sensitivity, active participation, emotional competencies, and awareness of prejudices. In this study, students' perceptions of the flow of information about the earthquake were discussed within the framework of basic media literacy theories.

2 Methodology

This study aimed to examine the perceptions of students taking a media literacy course about the content shared during the Kahramanmaraş earthquakes within the framework of media literacy theories. In line with this main objective, three basic questions were asked of students and the answers obtained from these questions were interpreted based on media literacy theories. These questions are as follows:

1. Were you able to access earthquake-related content presented in the media in a healthy way? What were the noise factors that prevented access to information?

2. What kind of verification methods did you use to select the correct information? What were the verification methods developed to eliminate disinformation?
3. Who were the media sources you used the most during the week of the earthquake? Which media tools did you use more functionally?

There are approximately 50 students taking the Media Literacy course at Gaziantep University, Faculty of Communication, and Department of Journalism between the academic years 2020-2024. In the study, structured interviews were conducted with 30 students randomly selected from the students who took this course for four years. Since the course is elective, the number of students taking the course during the semester does not exceed 15.

The study is a qualitative study. Purposive sampling was used. Purposive sampling is a type of sampling in which the most appropriate sample for the purpose of the study is selected and generalization to the universe is out of the question (Grix, 2010; Sale et al., 2002). The selection of the interviewees was based on the fact that the students had experienced the earthquake first-hand and had also taken a media literacy course. Structured questions were sent to the students via e-mail and WhatsApp applications and returned via the same applications. No additional questions were asked. Because the number of students was high, their answers to the above questions were evaluated. All the details in the interviews are details that the students themselves wanted to tell voluntarily. While dividing them into themes, the nature of the subjects they mentioned was taken into consideration. Interviews were conducted between July 10th and August 22nd, 2024.

A two-stage method was used to analyze the responses to the questions. First, thematic analysis was used. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis method used to identify, analyze and report patterns (themes) in data. It organizes and describes the (rich) data set in detail. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998). Secondly, the words obtained from the interviews were transferred to the Word Art program and converted into numerical data through this program. This numerical data showed which words were used more frequently, creating a word cloud, and the context of the interviews was thus schematized.

Details of the interviewees are given in Table 1.

Code	Gender, Province	Age
Participant 1	Female, Gaziantep	51
Participant 2	Female, Gaziantep	24
Participant 3	Female, Gaziantep	22
Participant 4	Male, Gaziantep	40
Participant 5	Female, Gaziantep	38
Participant 6	Female, Gaziantep	23
Participant 7	Male, Gaziantep	24
Participant 8	Male, Gaziantep	22
Participant 9	Female, Hatay	55
Participant10	Female, Gaziantep	31
Participant 11	Male, Gaziantep	26
Participant 12	Female, Gaziantep	29
Participant 13	Female, Gaziantep	18
Participant 14	Female, Gaziantep	20
Participant 15	Male, Gaziantep	27
Participant16	Male, Gaziantep	21
Participant17	Female, Gaziantep	28
Participant18	Male, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras	30

Participant 19	Female, Gaziantep	38
Participant 20	Female, Gaziantep	27
Participant 21	Female, Gaziantep	23
Participant 22	Female, Gaziantep	22
Participant 23	Female, Gaziantep	25
Participant 24	Female, Gaziantep	21
Participant 25	Female, Gaziantep	21
Participant 26	Female, Gaziantep	20
Participant 27	Female, Adıyaman	25
Participant 28	Male, Gaziantep	46
Participant 29	Female, Kayseri	20
Participant 30	Female, Gaziantep	26

TABLE 1: *Participants*

Source: own processing, 2024

All of the participants are students of Gaziantep University Faculty of Communication. Although some of them lived in Kahramanmaraş, Kayseri and Hatay during the earthquake, all of them experienced the earthquake.

3 Results

In this section, the qualitative analysis of the interviews and the visual and quantitative analysis of the words used in the interviews are under separate headings.

3.1 Qualitative Analysis of Interviews

Under this sub-title, the interviews were analyzed qualitatively under different themes. Access to earthquake-related content was evaluated separately under the themes of verification methods, measures taken against disinformation, and channels followed.

3.1.1 Access to Earthquake Related Content and Noise Factors

Under this heading, the participants were asked the following question: "Were you able to access earthquake-related content presented in the media in a healthy way? What were the noise factors that prevented access to information?" The themes are presented below under headings.

Infrastructure and Access Problems, Disinformation

Participants mainly drew attention to access problems. Participant 2 said "Thanks to social media, access to earthquake-related content was generally healthy. However, there were some noise factors that prevented access to information. Especially misinformation (disinformation) could spread rapidly. Speculation made it difficult to access information. For example, news that a dam had burst in Hatay caused panic, blocked traffic and disrupted business".

Participant 4 pointed out that adequate infrastructure was not provided in the earthquake zone and that the internet connection was cut off. He could not access accurate information, that information of unknown origin was disseminated instantly through social media and that society believed them, the local newspaper was not published anyway. Likewise, Participant 9 mentioned that there was a problem with internet access on the first day, he could not reach his phone because his phone was left at home for the first 3 days.

Another complaint about infrastructure was expressed by Participant 7: "Although the earthquake was not very destructive, especially in our region, it cut off our internet access. This situation showed us once again how bad the internet infrastructure is. Both the media restrictions imposed by the country's rulers and some obstacles imposed by media officials played a big role. There is a backwardness in our country in every field".

Participant 5 stated that access to traditional media was difficult in the first week: "My family and I were accessing earthquake-related content through social media. It was mostly environmental and psychological factors that made access to traditional media difficult. Because in the first period, even if the houses were intact, we could not even enter our homes".

The problem of access was also mentioned by Participant 12: "Of course, information that is difficult to confirm. The earthquake was the closest to the Van earthquake, and images from the Van earthquake were also involved. The information that people who were the source of accusations against Syrians were able to share on social media was difficult to verify. I must say that prejudice is among the noise factors that prevent access to information. Society is more inclined to believe news like disaster news. We don't have the habit of confirming it afterwards. Currently, the internet service is the first to be cut off in times of crisis".

Participant 16 used the following expressions: "I had trouble accessing the right content at first because many people started to share things. The media network was overflowing with such posts. This caused problems in finding the right content". Similarly, Participant 19 stated that the content was distorted.

Participant 23, who mentioned infrastructure problems, said "The biggest problem was internet access. Faced with the earthquake, people moved away from the city centers, which were becoming more and more concretized every day and consisted of high-rise buildings, and preferred to live in remote villages, vineyard houses and workplaces with containers where they felt safer. In these areas, telephone networks had poor reception due to the lack of infrastructure. This situation negatively affected people's communication with each other".

Participant 24 stated the following: "On the first day of the earthquake, we could not have a healthy access. We were experiencing internet problems, and we were in areas with poor infrastructure because we were trying to escape to calmer areas. Since we have been using a simple phone, social media has been our biggest source. Then, we accessed television and followed the news channels".

Participant 18 states that it took time for the access process to be organized as follows: "We tried to get information about the earthquake through news and content provided by mass and social media, but we encountered some problems in the first days. One of the main problems was the lack of electricity due to a malfunction in the energy infrastructure. Later, when the electricity was restored, we were able to use mass communication tools such as TVs, and then we were able to charge our cell phones with power banks distributed to earthquake victims".

Participants generally expressed the problems they experienced with access in the first days of the earthquake. Based on Potter's (2016) media literacy model, it is emphasized to understand and critically evaluate media messages. In emergency situations such as earthquakes, accessing reliable information through social media is crucial for survival. Potter emphasizes the importance of distinguishing reliable sources to make informed decisions. Similarly, Hobbs (2010) emphasizes the need for skills to identify sources quickly and efficiently in accessing information.

Political Influence, Internet Restrictions, Deliberate Access Barriers

Some of the participants raised issues such as politically and ideologically distorted content and broadcast restrictions. For example, Participant 20 expressed his distrust of traditional media as follows: "I could not access information in a healthy way because I once again saw that the traditional media served a certain group of people. I could be informed about the events and people thanks to WhatsApp and Telegram groups created by artists and social media phenomena. I was following X, but I saw that there was a lot of disinformation there.

We witnessed that people exploited the conscience of the society and defrauded them and played with their human values".

Participant 3 said "There were points where I could not access earthquake-related content in a healthy way. Official accounts were oblivious to many problems. The situation that I should especially mention was the restriction imposed at the time of the earthquake, this caused difficulties for earthquake victims in terms of interaction and transportation". Participant 1 also attributed the reason for not being able to access information in a healthy way to information pollution. He stated that the fact that the earthquake covered 11 provinces limited access to information and mentioned the negative impact of political polarization as follows: "The biggest factor in not being able to access information is the government authority imposed on the media and the fact that media organizations affiliated with the opposition resort to disinformation to make the authority look weak". Participant 6 stated that political polarization and pro-government news channels stand behind those who are negligent and that although access to many news sources is available, each news source reflects the news in different ways. She stated that it is difficult to distinguish which is the right news. Participant 8 mentioned misinformation and disinformation, the problem of source reliability in news, negative psychological impact, and delays in official reports.

Participant 25, who evaluated the issue in terms of politicians' restrictions, drew attention to the X block: "I could not have full access to the media, because we were outside for days. The access ban on applications such as X on the internet also prevented us from getting information. The fake news also created content pollution".

Referring to similar restrictions, Participant 28 said "I was able to access the earthquake-related content presented from TVs broadcasting within the permission of RTÜK. The only noise factor that prevented me from accessing information was RTÜK permissions or unauthorizations".

Some participants pointed out that getting information only from mainstream media is not reliable. Although social media provided more diverse information, the uncertainty of the source and information pollution posed a problem. Participant 11 said "I could not access the news in a healthy way because I could only have as much information as the mainstream media presented to us. When I tried to follow the news on social media, there were both too many posts of unknown origin and there were restrictions by the government to prevent sharing on social media". Participant 15 emphasized that social media and mainstream media contradict some information, and that there is a situation of distance and inability to confirm news and events. For example, the participant who stated that they compromised on the news about the looting of belongings said the following: "To give an example; one of the events I heard or saw on social media was that the looting and theft of the houses of people whose houses were destroyed went in parallel in the mainstream media (i.e. television journalism). My access to information was affected by media outlets that reported false and inaccurate news (especially the discourse of social media users) and media organizations that reported incomplete news. The devastating effects of the disaster, political/administrative/institutional etc. access barriers (although I cannot remember exactly, I can add that internet bandwidth was narrowed) were some noise factors".

Participants emphasized the access bans on some content. At this point Hobbs (2010) emphasizes the need for missing voices and neglected perspectives in society to be heard digitally. Similarly, Livingstone et al. (2005) pointed out that context, source credibility and understanding potential biases in news are vital for accessing accurate information. Livingstone et al. (2005) particularly emphasized that political biases can influence the content.

Click Journalism and Distortion of Information

Participant 26 emphasized the negative impact of click journalism: "I was able to access most of the information in the media, but most of the information I accessed was incomplete or misrepresented. People tried to create news for the sake of clicks without understanding what was happening".

Participant 29 criticized the trend of click journalism: "Most of the information was lies, exaggerations. The main reason for this was to arouse people's attention, increase the number of followers and increase the number of clicks".

Hobbs (2010) emphasizes critical thinking and scepticism and urges readers to question clickbait. Similarly, Potter (2016) emphasizes the concept of media intent and influence and helps to identify manipulative content. Livingstone et al. (2005) focus on context and bias and encourage deeper analysis beyond the headlines. Therefore, the concepts of critical thinking, skepticism, media intention, cognitive skills, and focus on context and bias come to the forefront theoretically at this point.

Emphasis on Psychological Breakdown

Participant 17 drew attention to the fact that psychological traumas were experienced more: "The collapse of Gaziantep Castle and the fact that the earthquake was shown as Gaziantep-centered led to a communication breakdown with my families abroad due to temporary network loss. This caused lasting anxiety, fear and panic, and my father suffered a heart attack and cerebral hemorrhage after seeing images of the castle on foreign channels. The speculation about "will there be another earthquake?" and the constant exposure to images of debris and death on television had a deep psychological impact. I could not watch television for a while due to this trauma".

Participant 30 likewise emphasized the panic atmosphere: "I had difficulty accessing healthy information in the first hours. For me, the main factors preventing access to information were crowded groups of people, fear and uncertainty. I was experiencing anxiety due to not knowing what to do and not getting accurate news. Most people around me were in a panic and my efforts to get news were not enough".

Content without Details

Participant 21 complained about news that only gave headlines and no details: "Some noise factors made it difficult to access information. These factors included false or incomplete information, speculative news that could cause panic, unfounded claims spread on social media, and posts from unverified sources. Some news items were only headlined and did not go into detail, preventing full access to information".

Obtaining Information from Friends

Participant 22 emphasized the support of friends in communication: "We were in constant communication with our friends and thus we were able to access accurate information. Today, even the region where the earthquake happened is still debated, so there is no certainty. We had access to information then, but it was very intense. We needed short and precise information because I didn't have time to read the news".

Participant 10 and Participant 27 pointed out that they did not experience problems related to infrastructure, but they had many experiences about information pollution.

In summary, the participants mainly expressed problems related to the interruption of internet access. Some participants especially emphasized and criticized the access barriers caused by the government. The ability to access different media sources and critically analyze the content is also considered important by Hobbs and discussed within digital media theory. Similarly, Hobbs emphasized the importance of "evaluation skills" and drew attention to the importance of assessing the reliability of information (Hobbs, 2010).

3.1.2 Verification Methods for Selecting Correct Information

Participants were asked "What kind of verification methods did you use to select the correct information? What were the verification methods developed to eliminate disinformation?" The themes are presented below under headings.

Trust in Official Sources and Orientation towards Government Officials

It is observed that the participants predominantly prefer to verify from official sources. For example, Participant 3 expresses his views as follows: "I tried to follow official accounts, and I found the posts of institutions and people I found reliable as accurate".

Participant 2 stated that he trusts official statements and said the following: "I check official statements. I also use tools such as reverse image search to verify the source of visual and video content. Today, various methods have been developed to eliminate disinformation. For example, the disinformation law. These have included the use of fact-checking sites, media literacy training, and efforts by social media platforms to detect and remove misinformation. But it is impossible to say that much has been done in the name of clickbait to get views from people". Participant 1 said: "I followed social networks, I followed TV news, I followed the speeches of government officials and other experts. I knew whether some news was disinformation or not after confirming it from many sources". Likewise, Participant 5 followed the statements of government officials: "I did not use any verification methods to select the correct information. However, government officials were constantly making statements about disinformation at that time. I was looking at their statements".

Participant 4, who used official sources such as governorate channels, stated the following: "I compared the information we received with the information shared on the governorate website or the governorate's social media accounts". Participant 17 also followed official accounts.

Participant 8 said "I use methods such as examining the accuracy of the news from official statements, following eyewitness accounts on social media, and examining the metadata of digital content. The methods developed to eliminate disinformation are:

- community reporting,
- collaboration with fact-checking,
- content moderation,
- education initiatives".

Participant 26, shared the following information: "The first method was to turn to earthquake news published on the websites of official organizations that I regularly follow I followed steps such as comparing news, trying to think critically, and not spreading accurate information without verifying it, and trying to read the news by considering its advertising share".

Participant 28 exemplified official sources as follows: "After any earthquake, I tried to learn the magnitude of the earthquake not only from AFAD data but also from the KANDİLLİ Observatory data".

Participant 11 said "I check the accuracy of the news I follow from many different media outlets. Then, I verify the news by checking the official institutions and the sources given in the news content".

Participant 9, who drew attention to the importance of television and government sources, said "I could not trust the information published on Facebook and Instagram because the source was not clear. Government sources intervened in some sensational news and tried to inform correctly. Television was used as an important media tool".

Participant 21 also said "I prioritized the content of news organizations that are known to be reliable. I also considered expert opinions and official statements. The verification methods used to eliminate disinformation included questioning the source of the news, checking the accuracy of the images with visual searches, and checking the information from more than one source".

Participants generally tended to use official sources. Participants who used their cognitive abilities thought that official sources had an important place in the process of sifting incoming messages. Critical thinking is highlighted as the most important feature in many media literacy theories (e.g., Potter, 2016; Buckingham, 2003; Livingstone et al., 2005; Hobbs, 2010). At the same time, the use of official sources provides critical evaluation, ethical responsibility and reliable information dissemination according to Mihailidis (2014).

Increasing Accuracy through Personal Efforts and Teyit.org

Participant 6 did not share news that he did not believe, stated that he paid attention to the reliability of the news source on the sites he followed and added: "I prevented disinformation news from spreading through me during the earthquake. If everyone did not share the first news they saw as true, perhaps disinformation news could be prevented in this way, even if only a little".

Participant 7, who pointed out the sensitivity of the site administrators, thought that this situation would facilitate the solution of the problem: "Especially in recent times, it has become very difficult to find accurate information. Trolls, influencers have aimed to be the center of attention with fake news. To choose accurate information, I follow pages that have proven themselves and have reached many followers. The subject that I interact with the most on social media is news. To obtain the most accurate and diverse news, I follow different news pages. Page administrators do not do much to eliminate disinformation. Again, the user himself does this job. The reader reads the news and if there is false information there, he voices it in the comments, complaint boxes. Yes, we have reader groups who react to disinformation, but this is not enough. Site owners can remain silent in this situation that produces false information and misleads people. Some applications try to break the negative effect of disinformation by telling users "If you see false information here, let us know".

Participant 19, who tries to verify the accuracy of information from many places, said "I even sometimes benefitted from foreign news sources. Old videos, photos or interview montages can be presented again as if they have been renewed. I think it is best to scan more than one source".

Participant 17, who stated that he used several verification methods to select the correct information, said "First, I checked the source of the news; I prioritized information from reliable and well-known news agencies. I compared multiple sources to verify whether a news item was true or not and observed the consistency of information".

Participant 12 activated the verification mechanism by matching many different sources. Participant 13 pointed out that sites such as Teyit.org should be used: "Attention should be paid to the style of the written text and the way the information is conveyed, and no sharing should be made about the news until the correct information is obtained". Participant 14 stated that he only trusts TV news. Participant 15, who stated that he trusts content shared by more than one person, stated that he also uses Teyit.org and added: "RTÜK, the mandatory broadcasting principles declarations and regulations that media organizations must comply with are effective in eliminating false reporting, called disinformation. Of course, sites such as 'eyit.org' and media publications will have a great impact in preventing disinformation".

Participant 18 said "When I saw a news or visual, I tried to research its basis. I questioned the source of the information and why it was reported. I followed many channels to verify and confirm these contents. Then, I followed the developments on social media and tried to confirm these developments from traditional media. I followed the statements made by institutions such as the presidency, ministries, governorships, and municipalities on social media. I watched the statements of experts and scientists".

Participant 20, who stated that it was quite difficult to verify news content at that time, but teyit.org provided access to verified news, said "When I saw that it was insufficient, I would compare the news on different social media platforms and follow a few TV channels that defined themselves as opposition in traditional media (tele1, fox tv, halk tv...)".

Similarly, Participant 22 said "As a verification method, my friends and I would all look at different media. If they all gave the same information, we would accept it as true; if different information was given, we would look at it as disinformation. I can say that the most important thing to prevent disinformation is not to use definitive language. For example, instead of the word 'it happened', it can be written as 'it was claimed to happen' or it may not be published unless its accuracy is confirmed. I think that disinformation can be distinguished in the simplest way. I applied the same method during the earthquake. "If a friend of mine noticed something

wrong, he would tell us, and we would all be skeptical of other information in that media. We would read about the same thing in other media," he said.

Participant 23 emphasized the contradictions: "As a person who lives in the earthquake area and experienced every moment of the earthquake, our biggest fear was the ongoing aftershocks and how long these earthquakes would last. Since we experienced the earthquake at 04:17 at night, during our sleep, I think we were more affected psychologically. I would like to explain this with an example from myself. It has been exactly 18 months since the earthquake. I still experience feelings such as shaking during my sleep. The first question that comes to my mind is, was there an earthquake? I search for the answer to this question on websites such as Last-Minute News, AFAD, Kandilli Observatory, Latest Earthquakes, even at night. I can sometimes see differences between these pages. For example, while one site shows the earthquake level as 4.0, another site may show it as 4.3".

Participant 24 also stated that it is very difficult to access accurate information and that he uses many different news sources to understand conflicting information. Participant 27 also said: "I tried to eliminate disinformation by comparing different news sources and following news channels that I trusted". Similarly, Participant 29 said "Following the news from accurate and reliable pages was my first step. I acted with the awareness that not every earthquake news was true. I tried to confirm the news I saw from more than one source".

Participant 30 shared his experiences regarding this process as follows: "Choosing the correct information was difficult. The sources that were effective here. The news pages that I had been following for years were reliable. They could not prevent disinformation in the early days. After a major disaster, everywhere was in a very chaotic state. The death toll and the number of injuries could differ across TV channels. There was a lot of fake news and false reports on social media platforms. It was stated that there would be some sanctions to deter those who spread false news".

Participant 25 said "The false information continued to spread days and even weeks after the earthquake. Because of this false information, we thought we would be exposed to major aftershocks, and because of the false guidance, our relatives who were waiting under the rubble lost their lives under the rubble".

The use of fact-checking sites has become widespread around the world and has been emphasized in media literacy theories. For example, Kellner and Share (2019) emphasized that FactCheck.org tools such as Snopes and FactCheck.org should be used in critical media literacy theories. Buckingham (2003) also emphasized critical thinking and active participation and drew attention to the importance of active participation in verification.

Trust in Traditional Media/National and International News Agencies

Participant 10, who mostly trusts traditional media, national and international news agencies, said "Since I worked as a reporter for many years, social media was not a definitive source for me. For this reason, I was checking news agencies in Turkey and foreign agencies to verify the information, comparing them all. But there were incredible differences between their news and social media news. I thought traditional media was more consistent and accurate. Sometimes, they shared the right information even if it was late. I knew that they were correct information instead of fast and wrong information".

Similarly, Participant 10 said "I followed national and reliable social media accounts and TV channels to choose the right information. I prioritized the news coming from these channels. The first thing to do to eliminate disinformation is to follow national and international media accounts with a large audience and prioritize their news".

In summary, it is revealed that the participants follow official sources, government officials, personal efforts, and fact-checking organizations, traditional, national and international agencies to get rid of the disinformation they constantly criticize. The observation that personal efforts have gained importance is important in the context of revealing the magnitude of disinformation.

3.1.3 The Most Used Sources Used

Participants were asked: "Which were the media sources you used the most during the week of the earthquake? Which media tools did you use more functionally?" The themes are presented below under headings.

X, Telegram and WhatsApp

Participant 2 said "During the week of the earthquake, I followed the agenda mostly from the X application. Because social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook etc. were full of posts that demoralized people and were made with the desire to gain emotional likes rather than enlightenment. I also followed the statements of official institutions and the reports of reliable news agencies. The posts of local media organizations and independent journalists were also important sources of information for me".

Similarly, Participant 3 said "I used social media platforms such as X, Telegram and WhatsApp. I used the social media account Rasathane to learn the magnitude of the earthquake and the intensity of the aftershocks. I followed private institutions that I found reliable for support and the managers of these institutions".

Participant 5 said "X was the source I used the most. I used alternative media tools functionally". Similarly, Participant 19 said "I used X the most because with the instant flow and constant updates, it was possible to communicate better than other media platforms".

Similarly, Participant 20 stated "WhatsApp reporting lines, Telegram groups and X created by artists such as Haluk Levent (Ahbap) were among the sources I trusted the most in this regard".

Participant 24, who stated that the application he used the most during the earthquake process was X, said "It was easy for me to follow up here and it helped us to make the voices of our circle that we could not reach heard. I was able to be informed from all sides quickly and up to date".

Participant 27, who stated that he used the X application the most during this process, said, "Because the process of news spreading and reaching the authorities is fastest in the X application". Although Participant 28 stated that he followed TV channels, he emphasized that he shared his posts on the X.

Participant 30 also said "Frankly, I used X the most". At that time, Oğuzhan Uğur and Haluk Levent were people who spread reliable information and had a big share in helping each other. I went through this process by following them as well" he said.

Official Sources and Social Media

Participant 8 emphasized both official sources and pointed to social media and television: "The sources you used the most during the week of the earthquake are as follows – AFAD and IHH (it was one of the most reliable sources during the earthquake period), Governorships and Municipalities, Ministry of Health, Adadolu Agency (the most reliable agency among the news channels), Kızılay, etc. The most functional media tools I used are as follows – social media (such as Facebook, Instagram, X), television, AFAD and IHH official websites".

Similarly, Participant 4 said "The Osmaniye Governorship of the Republic of Turkey was publishing all the information on its website, including its X, Facebook, and Instagram pages".

Participant 12, who stated that he followed the news outlets that he thought were well-established and impartial, said "At the same time, I followed the social media accounts of the institutions and organizations that were managing the crisis on social media and were actively involved in the developing events via my phone because it was practical. Then, I tried to confirm the information I could not verify by going to the environment/area that was the source of it and exchanging views with people. I think that the issue of verification is closely related to the development of media literacy, despite the increasing disinformation in times of crisis. We feel its absence more intensely in times of crisis such as earthquakes, floods, wars, and epidemics".

Participant 13 also said "The sources I used during the earthquake were the Ministry of Health, AFAD, and Kandilli Observatory. I used the sources I mentioned and X more frequently during this process".

Participant 15 said "During the week of the earthquake (of course before the internet bandwidth was throttled), I used social media tools such as X, Instagram, Facebook, news sites on the internet, and online broadcasts of television journalism. I also listened to decisions of the President, ministers, Kizilay, etc. organizations".

Participant 17, who stated that X was the source he used the most during the week of the earthquake, said "Because it provided fast information flow. Especially the posts of local people and journalists helped me a lot. I did not pay much attention to other media tools because most of the time it was important to access information as quickly as possible and X met this need. I also followed official accounts. During this process, thanks to social media, it was also possible to communicate with other earthquake victims and receive and give support. The speed and ease of access on X provided a great advantage in the chaotic environment".

Participant 21, who stated that he used the statements of official institutions, the evaluations of disaster experts and reliable news organizations the most during the week of the earthquake, continued as follows: "I especially followed AFAD and Kandilli Observatory. Apart from this, scientists were an important source for me. I found television news channels, official social media accounts and reliable news sites to be more functional. Platforms that provide instant information flow such as X were also useful, but I used them against disinformation".

Participant 26 mostly followed news channels that broadcast together in the first week after the earthquake. However, he stated that he could not access live broadcasts in the first two days after the earthquake and tried to progress by following institutions such as AFAD, Kandili Observatory, etc. that made official broadcasts via X, as well as experts in the field. He actively used the applications he could communicate with to reach people in need of help.

Participant 9 said "We were following TRT broadcasts. A lot of the news I saw on social media had a great effect on my psychology. That's why I tried to follow TRT news. About a month after the earthquake, a television was brought to the room where we were staying. I found the earthquake news I received from television to be more reliable than social media, so I used television more functionally".

Participants frequently used social media, especially Twitter, although they tried to confirm the information they doubted from official sources. This situation reveals how important work has been done, especially by theorists developing digital media literacy theory (Mihailidis, 2014; Jenkins, 2006; Hobbs, 2010). While Mihailidis (2014) emphasizes critical thinking, ethical awareness and active participation, Jenkins (2006) draws attention to collaboration and collective intelligence in the digital field. Hobbs emphasized competencies in access, analysis, creation, reflection and act.

TV Channels and Agencies

Participant 10 said "I was using Anadolu Agency, TRT NEWS, TRT WORLD, AFP, BBC, NTV, CNN INTERNATIONAL and CNN TÜRK. I was following their own websites and social media accounts".

Participant 11 stated that he turned to television due to blockages and slowdowns as follows: "I mostly followed the aid organizations in the region via social media, but because of blockages and slowdowns, I had to follow the news via news channels via television". Similarly, Participant 14 said "I couldn't use the phone because the internet didn't work, so I had the chance to watch television".

Participant 16 emphasized television: "I generally benefited from the news on the websites of national channels with large audiences on social media and on TV channels. I gave priority to any rumors about the earthquake. I followed social media accounts and TV channels via my phone".

Participant 18 said "We mostly benefited from news sites and social media posts of media organizations on our mobile phones. Because our mobile phones were the most useful, we used them by charging them in a short time. I also tried to follow the agenda on TV".

Participant 28 stated that "99% of the time I benefitted from TV news and special earthquake programs. But since I did not have any authority or duty, I did not use traditional media".

Generally, "Social Media"

Participant 7 said "We stayed in the collection areas during the first week. It was impossible to reach television and computers. We could only access our phones. We followed the news on social media. Of course, we were also exposed to disinformation. However, the biggest problem we experienced was the internet infrastructure. We used our phones most actively in the first week, but since the internet was very bad, we could not use our phones much. Again, we received useful information mostly from social media. Since there were administrators who did not state the number of deaths and injuries correctly, we followed news that had experienced those events and was close to definitive information as the most accurate source". Participant 1 said, "I mostly followed breaking news, TV news. I followed social media platforms such as X and Facebook".

Participant 29, who stated that he followed the earthquake on social media during the first days, said "We downloaded applications that dropped earthquake notifications on our phones. These applications were not a very healthy decision. The fact that there were too many aftershocks caused additional panic. Later, since I could not access the internet, I was able to follow the news from common news channels on television".

Instagram

Participant 22, who stated that she looked at the content on Instagram most often during the week, said "It was a medium that I could access more quickly. For example, I was following media institutions such as Newstimesturkey, BBC News Turkish, TRT Haber and GZT. I used most functionally the websites".

Similarly, Participant 23 said "I got the most information were citizen journalism Instagram pages, AFAD, AHBAB (Haluk Levent) Kandilli observatory pages. I followed the accounts I listed above for our friend who was under the rubble for 11 days during the earthquake and could not be saved. I made social media interactions such as Topic Tags, Hashtag #, Add me too".

News Sites and Reporters

Participant 6 stated that there was a problem with internet access and said "Most of the channels were in the earthquake area to broadcast live anyway. I didn't need to look at additional news sources. When I had internet access, I was constantly looking at the sites that I follow the news, but we were so tired that we often couldn't find the opportunity to review the news. We mostly got information from reporters and journalists who came to the scene".

In summary, it has been revealed that social media is extremely effective but also often causes disinformation. X is followed a lot because it mostly provides instant news. WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, Facebook are frequently mentioned social media tools. Participants who follow official channels, national and international news agencies in cases where they cannot trust the information, they get from social media stated that they also follow television, news sites and various reporters who come to the earthquake area from time to time. While the names of organizations such as AFAD, Kandilli Rastahanesi, and TRT are frequently mentioned among official channels, the Ahbap Association, where artist Haluk Levent works voluntarily, is also frequently mentioned. According to Ofcom (2022), in crisis situations such as disasters, people mostly turn to websites, TV channels and follow up-to-date information. Social media is also predominantly used, but it poses risks due to the rapid dissemination of unverified information. The findings of the study support the Ofcom report.

3.2 Visual and Quantitative Analysis

In this section, the data obtained from the interviewees were visualized and supported with numerical data. They were schematized using the Word Art program. While creating the diagram, prepositions were not included in the analysis. The result is as follows:

FIGURE 1: *Word cloud from the interviews*

Source: own processing, 2024

When the word cloud is analyzed, it is clearly seen that the word “media” is dominant, followed by “news” and “inform”. Therefore, it can be said that getting information from the media through news is the theme that the interviewees emphasized the most. Consider that the words “follow”, “earthquake”, “social”, “trust” are other prominent words. The emphasis on trust in the media and social media in the earthquake is also reflected in the word cloud. The figure of which words are expressed numerically through the Word Art program is reflected as follows:

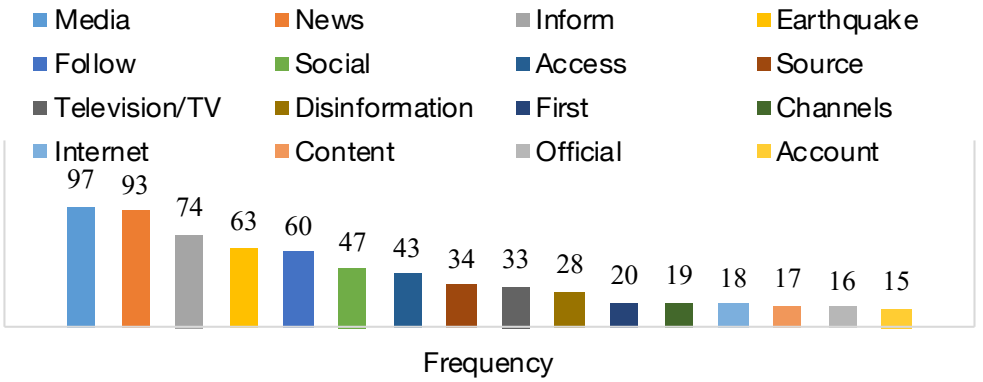

FIGURE 2: *Most expressed words*

Source: own processing, 2024

According to Figure 2, it can be said that the framework of the words has connotations especially related to social media, television, disinformation and official content. Words with less than 15 mentions are not included.

The prominent words reveal the importance of critical thinking in media literacy. Because when the word "inform" is in the foreground, there is a desire to be informed. The prominence of words related to the internet draws attention to the importance of developing theories in the field of digital media literacy. Despite intensive digitalization, the prominence of television indicates its continued high influence, and the prominence of the word "official" indicates the existence of ethical searches. The fact that the word "disinformation" was mentioned 28 times clearly demonstrates the necessity of digital media literacy, especially in this field where digital content is emphasized.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Media literacy gains importance especially in times of crisis, with its dimensions such as understanding and evaluating the news correctly, disseminating it ethically, and removing disinformation. Many media literacy theories agree on the importance of critical thinking (Hobbs, 2010; Potter, 2016; Livingstone et al., 2005; Mihailidis, 2014; etc.).

The Kahramanmaraş earthquakes affected the whole of Turkey causing panic for earthquake victims and other citizens trying to reach them, who mainly used cell phones for information exchange, mainly used social media channels to get news. However, some problems such as information pollution, sharing of panic-inducing news, misleading information and distortion of information due to political polarization were reflected, especially on social media tools. Noting that social media, especially X, as well as WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram and Facebook applications are frequently used, the participants mostly followed national and international news agencies and reliable news sites, tried to verify the content by their own efforts and shared this information with each other. While verification methods were mostly cited as following official sources and government officials' statements, teyit.org was the most frequently mentioned verification platform, as proposed by Kellner and Share (2019). While institutions such as AFAD and Kandilli Observatory are reliable official sources, AHBAP, which continues its activities under the leadership of artist Haluk Levent, has come to the forefront in terms of reliability as a voluntary association. Therefore, in the period in question, media literacy competencies came to the forefront in terms of both cooperation and participation, as Jenkins (2006) states.

Most of the participants had difficulties in communicating due to problems in infrastructure and internet access, especially on the day of the earthquake. Some participants pointed out that the state also imposed access barriers from time to time. Participants who stated that there were disruptions in access in general also emphasized information pollution and disinformation. They attributed the cause of information pollution to many factors: for example, political polarization, misleading people through commercial clickjournalism, false posts to criticize the government, or those who claim that the government is giving false information about the death toll, and many other reasons which may have caused information pollution. This situation reminded us of the importance of the ability to think free from political bias, which was emphasized by Livingstone et al. (2005). At the same time, "cognitive skills" emphasized by Potters (2016) and "critical thinking" pointed out by Mihailidis (2014) gained importance at this point, and many students struggled to access accurate information by using different sources.

Participants stated that they were frequently exposed to disinformation, and that they had unhappy experiences due to the panic they experienced from time to time, that they were misled about the assistance they received and that they themselves were victimized. Receiving different information from different sources about the time of the earthquake and experiencing constant panic caused some participants to experience psychological problems. This situation of students

who were able to manage their emotions and share information revealed the importance of the concept of "emotional skills" pointed out by Potter (2016). Managing emotions is important for healthy information exchange. Some of the participants stated that they were sensitive about not sharing false news. This reveals that they behave in accordance with Potter's (2016) concept of "ethical skills".

In summary, students who experienced the Kahramanmaraş earthquake faced problems such as disinformation, conscious internet restrictions, access barriers, emotional stress and panic, and struggled to cope with them. They showed active participation especially in "cognitive skills" and "critical thinking", which are mentioned in almost all theories. They were willing to participate and cooperate, they tried to verify information from many sources, but they also had negative experiences. In order to ensure more qualified news broadcasting in crisis situations such as earthquakes, states should make plans within their own organizations, provide trainings to their correspondents in this direction, and media literacy should be taught as a course not only in universities but also at primary school level.

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